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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SUVA 000109

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TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR PHUM FJ

SUBJECT: MILITARY INSERTS ITSELF INTO FIJI'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN, LASHES OUT AT POLICE

REF: A. SUVA 072 AND PREVIOUS

- IB. SUVA 009
IC. SUVA 098

Classified By: AMBASSADOR LARRY M. DINGER. SECTIONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

I1. (SBU) Summary: In the run-up to May's elections, the war of words between the government and military in Fiji continues to intensify. In radio and print interviews over the past week, Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) Commander, Frank Bainimarama, issued a series of blasts against the government, saying by merging with the nationalist CAMV political party and continuing to advocate "racist" policies, the ruling SDL "is continuing the same (nationalist) lies" that led to the 2000 coup. Bainimarama has ordered RFMF representatives to visit many of Fiji's villages as part of a pre-election "truth campaign" aimed, apparently, at discrediting the SDL. In a written statement issued March 13, PM Qarase condemned Bainimarama's recent statements as well as the RFMF "truth campaign" as "interference in the government and political affairs of Fiji" and as a threat to the conduct of free elections. On March 14, the RFMF lashed out at Fiji's Commissioner of Police, Australian Andrew Hughes, alleging that a recent purchase of weapons by the police amounted to "deliberately arming Fijians against Fijians." Most Fiji media have reported both sides of this debate in a reasonably balanced way. All three major newspapers have criticized Bainimarama for improper military involvement in a civil election campaign and/or his attack on the Police. End summary

Bainimarama Turns Up the Rhetoric

I2. (SBU) While the RFMF has backed off its previous stance that elections in Fiji must be delayed until a new census is undertaken (ref A), it has apparently decided to play an active role in the election campaign. In extensive radio and print interviews during the past week, Commodore Bainimarama unleashed another torrent of criticism against the government. (Note: soon after the radio broadcast, State-owned Fiji Broadcasting Limited fired the talk-show host who interviewed Bainimarama, stating the host had violated editorial policies in arranging and conducting the interview.) Bainimarama told the Fiji Times newspaper on March 13 that the ruling SDL's "continuous bowing to the nationalist elements in its government...has brought us to loggerheads." Bainimarama said the RFMF had assumed when it put Qarase in power (in 2000, as interim PM), that Qarase and the SDL would educate the people against the nationalist elements that had led to the 2000 coup. "Instead, they have done the opposite, continuing the lies that forced our rural people from the villages into Parliament," (i.e. participated

in taking over Parliament in 2000).

Military Starts "Truth Campaign"

¶3. (SBU) Bainimarama announced March 10 that the RFMF would launch a "truth campaign" through the media and visits to villages. The campaign, he said, will target governmental policies that contravene the constitution. RFMF Spokesman Lt. Colonel Orisi Rabukawaqa later insisted the campaign would not be targeted against the SDL per se, but would focus on the need for good leadership and good governance. The military wants to ensure, he continued, that the nationalist events of 2000 are not repeated. Another military spokesman, Captain Neumi Leweni, told us March 14 that the "truth campaign" in villages is a continuation of an ongoing military public relations effort to educate villagers on democracy and the rule of law. He said several military teams are already visiting villages and are counseling prospective voters to "make a wise choice" in the elections.

A Broadside Against the Police

¶4. (SBU) On March 14, the RFMF released an unexpected broadside against the Police, reprising a claim made earlier this year (ref B) that the police were being improperly armed by the government in order to counterbalance the military. The RFMF press release claimed that, in acquiring these arms, Police Commissioner Andrew Hughes "is impinging on the sovereignty of this country by deliberately arming Fijians against Fijians." The RFMF also alleged that Hughes (an Australian) was taking part in an Australian-led effort to shrink the size of Fiji's military. "The RFMF wishes to state that Mr. Hughes is a silent extension of the Australian

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Defence White Paper where it had recommended that the role of the military in Fiji be siphoned off to the Police and that its strength be reduced to 100 men for ceremonial purposes only." The RFMF media release concluded that "the RFMF wishes to advise the Commissioner of Police together with his tactical response team that they are merely creating an environment which if allowed to escalate will be 2nd November 2000 (the date of an attempted mutiny against the RFMF leadership) all over again but in a much bigger scale."

¶5. (SBU) Comment: The reference to a "white paper" apparently refers to a draft "Security and Defense Review" conducted in Fiji in 2003-2004. According to contacts at the Australian High Commission, the draft review was mainly funded by the Government of Fiji, although Australia provided and funded one of three panel members - the Chairperson. The RFMF declined to participate in the review. Among other recommendations, the draft called for decreasing the size of the RFMF by about 20%. The draft did not suggest that the RFMF should be made into a force only used for ceremonial purposes. End Comment.

¶6. (SBU) Other events took place March 14-15 that may or may not be related to the RFMF criticism of the police. On the evening of March 14, the Police Tactical Response Team (PTRT, the unit receiving much of the new equipment) received an anonymous call warning that a move was about to be made against the Team. On the morning of March 15, RFMF operational forces staged an armed "stand to" readiness drill, which caught Suva's attention. An RFMF spokesman said the drill was routine, but observers wondered if it was also a signal of RFMF resolve.

¶7. (C) Hughes, who has had a good working relationship with Bainimarama, told reporters he was surprised by the content and tone of the media release, and disappointed the RFMF had taken the issue to the media instead of conferring with him. The press release, he said, was factually incorrect. All of the equipment ordered was standard for police department SWAT

teams throughout the world. Hughes held a press conference March 15 in which he again reviewed the uses of the equipment the police had purchased. "We are not arming Fijians against Fijians but arming the police to deal with criminals." Hughes told Embassy's Assistant Legatt on March 15 that the RFMF has long known about the police equipment. In fact, Bainimarama and other RFMF officers had been scheduled to visit police headquarters to observe the PTRT and its new equipment on March 10, but canceled at the last minute. Hughes said he would be meeting Bainimarama to discuss the RFMF statement on March 16.

Qarase Says Military's Actions are Undemocratic, Claims Rival Political Parties are Urging the RFMF on

¶18. (SBU) A spokesman for PM Qarase's SDL party told reporters on March 13 that the party had sent a letter of complaint about Bainimarama's comments to the President, Police Commissioner, Director of Public Prosecutions, Attorney General and the Supervisor of Elections. The spokesman alleged that Bainimarama's statements against the government and the RFMF's "truth campaign" are a blatant attempt to corrupt the electoral process. Fiji's Electoral Commission also lodged a complaint with the police, stating the RFMF had breached election laws and its actions threatened free and fair elections. Media reports indicate that PM Qarase met with Vice President Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi March 14, in part to discuss the Commander's recent statements. Fiji's National Security Council also met several times in the last week.

¶19. (SBU) In a full page statement issued March 13 and printed in all three major newspapers, PM Qarase called Bainimarama's recent remarks "undemocratic and unwarranted." "The Commander's stated intention of involving the military in the national election campaign is a threat to peace and stability, and the conduct of free elections." Qarase also called the military's campaign an unauthorized and illegal spending of public money. Qarase asserted that rival political parties (read: Mahendra Chaudhry's FLP) are encouraging Bainimarama's actions. "Political parties and others who are encouraging the Commander are doing the country and the people a great disservice.. .They are not concerned about the future of democracy and the rule of law in Fiji."

Media Criticize RFMF for Crossing the Line

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¶10. (SBU) The continuing war of words between the government and the RFMF has dominated headlines the past week. Reporting has been relatively balanced, with the statements of both government and the RFMF accurately reported. Editorials and op-eds in all three major newspapers criticized Bainimarama's campaign. The Fiji Sun (at times critical of the current government) stated that "the military cannot have a role in the 2006 election." "Even those who agree with what the commander has to say feel aggrieved that he has entered the political arena." The pro-government Fiji Post demanded action to deal with "the recalcitrant, irredeemable, backstabbing commander." After the RFMF's attack on the police, the Fiji Times wrote that Bainimarama "has now stepped beyond the limits of decency and professionalism." "More and more people are beginning to wonder if something is amiss up at Queen Elizabeth Barracks."

On Top of All This, A Serious Family Issue

¶11. (SBU) Meanwhile, media and police sources report that Commodore Bainimarama has involved himself in an indecent-assault trial in Nadi by confronting the accused and

ordering his armed body guards to position themselves intimidatingly close in court. According to a reliable source, the victim in the case is a close relative of the Commander. The attorney for the accused has filed a complaint against Bainimarama.

Comment

¶12. (C) Still more than seven weeks before the elections, tensions are high in Fiji. Many people believe Bainimarama has stepped beyond the reasonable bounds of the military's role in a democratic process by his recent statements and the RFMF's "truth" campaigning. The government and PM Qarase's party have responded by calling on the newly reappointed President to rein in the Commander. Whether the President will make that attempt and how the RFMF would respond remain uncertainties.

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